

StrengthsQuest in Application: The Experience of Four Educators

The Power of Teaching Students Using Strengths *by Gloria Henderson*

Like Chip Anderson, whose essay you read earlier in this issue, I was initially taught to use the deficit-remediation model with my students. Even in that negative context, though, and with no exposure at all to strengths-based education, I unconsciously based my early teaching on four of my five Clifton StrengthsFinder signature themes: *Significance* (I wanted to be recognized for having made a difference to each student); *Achiever* (I focused on individual students and tried to energize them to establish and reach their goals); *Restorative* (I was confident that I would create success in even those students who had lost all hope); and *Futuristic* (I developed a vision for my students with the identified deficits reduced or eliminated).

As I learned about strengths-based education after I entered Azusa Pacific University's doctoral program, I came to realize the importance of systematic research and the application of research results in developing the most effective instructors possible. I became determined to use my own strengths consciously and deliberately.

Consciously Applying Strengths to Decide on a Job

I knew I had found my calling when I saw a position posting for a late-term-replacement teacher of at-risk kids in a program structured as a school-within-a-school. The school offers more Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes than regular classes. The students I would teach composed the "school within." They had covered only a minimal amount of content and had not met the state standards.

Being Restorative, I found it natural to identify and take a constructive approach to the students' deficits in skills and the lack of decorum in the classroom. I looked at each student as an individual to determine

areas in which performance was satisfactory and those in which it needed improvement. Being Futuristic, I dreamed big for my new students, and being an Achiever, I developed a plan to make my vision a reality. I conducted research to find lessons, discipline plans, and other resources to assist my students. I also sought advice from other teachers, who brought different strengths to bear. Although I endured many tests from those students, I became a much more effective teacher by consciously using my strengths and encouraging them to use theirs.

Consciously Applying Strengths to Develop Teaching Style

I now teach a sophomore English class for at-risk students at the same school. As an Achiever I set high expectations because I know that if I lower the bar and set expectations that are too easy to reach, the students will meet the expectations yet still not pass the required high school exit exam.

Although I fully intend that every student will pass the exit exam (Significance), I employ a Restorative teaching style that seems to fit my students particularly well. I tease them, cajole them, encourage them, tell them they are better than they think they are, and express my concerns and my hopes for them. I do not focus my efforts on content, but they seem to have a huge impact on how well the students learn the content.

So far the fit between my strengths and my job seems to be working well for the students. I have overheard students telling their friends, “Our English class is fun,” “We didn’t learn how to do that last year,” “Can I take this class next semester?” and “I got a B on a test!” And although it is expected that my at-risk students will not perform as well as the others in the school, they did perform as well, if not better, on recent vocabulary benchmark tests.

After I initiated a video-technology program for the school, my at-risk students successfully took on the challenge of learning theory and abstract application with very limited experiential learning. Even though the equipment arrived late, the students completed a number of well-done projects—remakes, public service announcements, school- and community-focused films, music videos, instructional videos, independent films, and trailers—in only a few short weeks.

For years my students have been told that they are not the best—or worse than that. Evidently, though, many students simply did not understand what was expected of them or lacked the incentive to perform. By consciously using my own strengths, I have been able to address such specific needs. In return I have found it gratifying to make a real, measurable difference. By consciously matching the challenges I undertake with my strengths, I have been able to enjoy greater initial success than I would have otherwise. I have come to believe that although most

people already use their strengths intuitively, any teacher will foster greater student achievement and success by clearly identifying and consciously applying strengths.

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A Principal: The Power of Strengths-Based Leadership

by Kathryn Norwood

I discovered the strengths-based perspective in a doctoral class taught by Chip Anderson at Azusa Pacific University when he was in the last stages of developing the StrengthsQuest program. After completing the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, I was able to identify five of my top talent themes: Focus, Maximizer, Strategic, Relator, and Self-Assurance.

With my Signature Themes identified, I could examine successes in both my personal and professional lives and see how they reflected talents that I had turned into strengths. As a child, for instance, I would organize the other kids on the block and plan the activity for the day. As a teenager, peers often selected me as the organizer or leader of small groups within my church, club, and school.

I believe I used my talents when I was a teacher, too, but I see that more from the results than from the process at the time. Consider the shy, quiet young man who struggled with academics but was incredibly artistic. In my biology class I encouraged him to express the water and carbon dioxide cycles by drawing sketches. The pencil and charcoal drawings were so good that I have kept them to this day. Five years after he left my class, he returned to ask, "Remember me? . . . You were the only one in my life who ever believed that I could succeed. My whole family voted me 'least likely to succeed' at my high school graduation party.

"But you always believed in me. Now I am a college graduate and I have two offers for postgraduate work in the field of art, one in New York and one in Paris." I had combined my themes of Maximizer—what a particular student was really good at—with Relator: nurturing, refining, and asking that student to stretch himself to become successful.

The next year I became a high school counselor—essentially a full-time Relator—and in four years in that position I felt that I was helping teenagers become successful and realize their potential. A district assistant superintendent, however, kept asking me, "Do you see yourself as a high school assistant principal or maybe principal someday?" I began taking credential courses to prepare myself for an administrative posi-

tion. In retrospect, I see that I was using my Strategic theme by implicitly asking myself, “What if that opportunity arose?”

Although the opportunity did indeed arise, as a first-year high school assistant principal I struggled with my career aspirations. At that point I was introduced to StrengthsQuest. For the first time I articulated Focus and Self-Assurance as well as the three themes that had been evident earlier in my career. Once I had identified and affirmed those talents, I could see the opportunity to achieve excellence in leadership positions. I consciously began using my Focus theme to serve as a compass and my Self-Assurance theme to prepare to become a high school principal. Less than a year later I secured a position as a principal.

Strengths-Based Leadership

Coming into an established school as a stranger, I knew that I had to devise a method of understanding the existing culture and climate. I turned to my Strategic theme and scheduled carefully designed fifteen-minute interviews with every staff member. My final question in each interview was, “What do you see as your greatest strengths?” Besides ending the interview on an upbeat note, the question also allowed me to identify the strengths of each staff member to make the most of his or her potential.

During the first staff meeting I announced a discovery I had made during the interviews: “I discovered that I am the principal of the best high school in the world.” Then I asked all five members of management to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Now, those who enter the management office are able to recognize a new culture and climate that identify individual talents and strengths used by each member to achieve excellence.

To focus staff members on their strengths, I added a “Best Practices” segment to our monthly meeting. High school teachers typically do not get the opportunity to observe other teachers, so Best Practices allows each teacher to showcase ideas that have been successful. Best Practices focuses on the results of using strengths rather than on the link between the strengths and the results. In effect it is a derivative of a StrengthsQuest-based segment. It is effective, and I plan to build on Best Practices so staff members can explore the personal strengths that underlie their successes.

Acting as co-facilitator in a recent management-training program designed to promote leaders from within the district, I combined strengths-based instruction with the existing program. I randomly selected eleven of the twenty-two participants to experience immediate intervention with strengths-based instruction. The remaining eleven participants later began a delayed intervention.

The first eleven completed the Clifton StrengthsFinder, read *StrengthsQuest*, and attended five sessions of intense training and instruction led personally by Dr. Anderson. When I distributed *StrengthsQuest* material to the eleven delayed-intervention participants at a recent meeting, the eleven who had just completed their final strengths session could not contain themselves. Their faces shining with excitement, they eagerly endorsed strengths-based instruction: “I know my unique strengths now”; “I use [my strengths] every day, and I observe others and can identify their strengths”; “I now understand why and how I can be successful.”

Looking back on my own life, I see clearly how my talents have always been present. But until I took the Clifton StrengthsFinder, I couldn’t put a name on them, and until I could put a name on them I couldn’t develop and apply them. Now I consciously use my strengths daily to foster excellence in my staff, my students, and myself in a way that would not have been possible previously.

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A Teacher: The Power of Teaching Students about Their Strengths *by Alexis Onishi*

“What’s wrong with me?” Every day, high school students ask that question in one form or another: Why don’t some people like me? Why don’t I look right? What could I possibly offer anyone? Am I ever going to actually make my parents happy? Such focus on the negative saps effort, initiative, creativity, confidence, and enthusiasm just when those qualities are most needed to carry adolescents into adulthood. Until recently the students in my school were victims of that negative focus.

Last fall, seeing an urgent need for a change in how students perceive themselves, Principal Don Austin led the implementation of a mandatory freshman seminar that revolves around StrengthsQuest. Implementing StrengthsQuest provided an opportunity for students to stop asking “What’s wrong with me?” and start asking “What’s right with me?”

StrengthsQuest seems to have changed how students think of themselves. For example, during the first week of the course, one freshman referred to herself on several occasions as a “loser,” saying that she was not a “likable person” because “*everybody* says I can’t do anything right.” After four weeks’ exposure to StrengthsQuest, she told me that she believes she does have talents, wants to develop her strengths so she can

improve in school, and believes that she has the ability to be successful in any class.

StrengthsQuest has also affected the way in which students interact. Walking down the hall, I was stopped in my tracks to hear one student ask another student, “Hey, what are your strengths?” Contrast *that* to the snippets you usually hear in the halls of a high school. With so much of academic achievement being a function of self-concept, we also hope to see gains in objective performance after enough time has passed to measure them.

To accomplish such changes in perception, students devoted the first six-week section to learning about their talents and strengths. We broke down the section into five emphases: 1) a three-day introduction; 2) taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder and comprehending the results; 3) accepting and owning our talents and strengths; 4) understanding the strengths of other people; and 5) applying strengths to academics.

Introduction

The three-day introduction achieved two things: preparation and fascination. Preparation was necessary because the vocabulary the students would encounter in the Clifton StrengthsFinder is geared to college students. In practice, however, preparation amounted to little more than learning a few vocabulary words. In both discussions and reflective writing about the discussions, I found that the students were intrigued by the idea that they might have the same talents as graduates of UCLA, Harvard, or Yale.

The introduction seemed to have a positive effect on the students’ attitudes toward the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Every student put effort into the assessment and no student dismissed it as unimportant—a rare thing for a group of ninth-graders. Even before we began our structured study of the students’ Signature Themes, the students were comparing and discussing who had what talents.

Taking StrengthsFinder and Comprehending the Results

We structured the comprehension process around three tools: “catchphrase collages,” “tea-party explanations,” and a worksheet. Students build catchphrase collages with words cut out of magazines that define or remind them of what their talents entail. Tea-party explanations require the students to mingle as if they were at a party. We structured that work around a picture that each student drew, and also the worksheet “Signature Themes in Common—Similar and Dissimilar Experiences” found in the StrengthsQuest teacher’s guide.

Accepting and owning talents and strengths was a particularly difficult step for many students. Some had simply never entertained the idea

that they have strengths, and it took time and thought for them to accept the idea. Others appeared to find accepting and owning talents threatening. Discussing one student's resistance with him, I found that he recognized that in accepting and owning his talents, he implicitly assumed responsibility for his own success. Thus, he was effectively waiving excuses for nonperformance with which he had become comfortable. I feel that the students who had the most difficulty accepting and owning their talents are those most significantly affected by the class.

Understanding the Strengths of Other People

Two worksheets from the StrengthsQuest teacher's guide, "Building Awareness of Our Signature Themes" and "Understanding and Respecting Talent Differences," require students to interact with one another and to learn the description of each of the thirty-four talent themes and their benefits and challenges. In the process, the students discovered that focusing on talents and strengths changes not only how they view themselves, but how they view others as well.

That was a major insight for most of them, and to emphasize it we listed ways that people judge others—looks, race, grades, athletics, money, and clothes. We brainstormed what it would be like if people based their opinions on strengths instead, and the students said that it would "change everything." They said they would feel less pressure, wouldn't try to be someone they are not, and probably would be less sensitive to what people thought of them. I was surprised at how readily the students acknowledged that they often judge others by unfair standards and how willing they were to consider judging others in new ways.

To develop skill in picking out other people's strengths, we used journals and activities, speculating, for example, about what strengths popular television or movie characters might have.

Applying Strengths to Academics

The StrengthsQuest book offers suggestions for how to use each Signature Theme in academics, so we asked students to come up with three ways in which they could actually accomplish the suggestions offered for the first theme. We also used a worksheet from the StrengthsQuest teacher's guide, "Academic Tasks I Do with Ease." Listing the tasks and associating them with their own strengths helped the students recognize that they tend to do well in academic tasks that employ their strengths, and tend to enjoy doing tasks they do well. Thus they came to see that school is more enjoyable when they use their strengths than when they don't. Greatly to my surprise, that revelation seemed to have a positive effect on even some of the true hard cases: rebellious,

angry, immature students who often behave as if they do not want to learn, grow, or accomplish anything.

During the second six-week section the students will apply their newfound talents to choosing relationships, colleges, and careers. I don't know what the effect of that section will be, but do I believe that the first six-week section made an immediate and significant difference in several students' lives. I believe that for many others it will have a life-long impact on how they see themselves, others, and life in general. At a more concrete, objective level, I am confident that the class will lead to better academic performance. Unlike the qualitative life changes, it is an outcome we may be able to measure in the near future.

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A Student: The Power of Learning Your Strengths *by Jenna Friesen*

Throughout my life the consensus expectation has been that I would “get better” at things. To that end, my teachers’ approach was to point out what I had done wrong, and my track coaches tried to inspire me to make my worst into my best. I was constantly told to “change this” or “improve that.”

Please do not misunderstand me: I have been surrounded with adults who love me and want only life’s best for me. But they thought the only way to achieve that was to correct my flaws and strengthen my weaknesses. Consequently, for the first twenty years of my life, I pushed myself to overcome my weaknesses.

A year ago I was introduced to StrengthsQuest. For the first time I was asked to think about only my talents and my strengths. Since then I have come to realize how sensitive I am to what people say to me. I now see that when my teachers and coaches focused entirely on helping me correct flaws and address weaknesses, I was constantly discouraged. StrengthsQuest, however, gave me a confidence I had never felt before by causing me to focus instead on my talents and strengths—Discipline, Empathy, Belief, Responsibility, and Communication.

Once I became attuned to my Signature Themes I immediately recognized three: Discipline, Belief, and Responsibility. These were talents that I had always shown—I had just not been able to name them. Merely articulating obvious Signature Themes, however, had an impact. For example, people have always joked about how I tend to be less flexible than many others, I crave routine, and I don’t like change. Because I now

understand, however, that those traits accompany the talent theme of Discipline, I no longer see them as necessarily negative.

I am in my early twenties, a time when many of my peers have experimented extensively with sex, drugs, and alcohol. I have not. That used to be difficult to explain to others, and even to myself. Now I can see that my Signature Theme, Belief, causes me to see life in black-and-white, right-or-wrong contrasts more than most people do and to make choices that trouble others but are quite clear to me.

Although three of my Signature Themes were easy for me to see in my usual behavior, the themes of Communication and Empathy were not. Before learning about my talent for communication, I had been hesitant to answer questions in class, confront others, or speak in a group. When I learned from StrengthsQuest about my talent for finding the “right” words, I knew it was all right to speak up more often, because others’ silence often meant simply that they did not know what to say.

Applying Empathy, my other less-obvious Signature Theme, has enabled me to choose questions and comments in my classes, phrase them, and time them so they feed into the instructors’ structure and delivery. I think that often helps the instructors’ responses and that most of the students understand them more clearly as a result.

Knowing my talents has even helped my relationship with my fiancé. As we all know, relationships require work, and strengths-based thinking has provided the context and direction for that work. Because each of us knows the other’s Signature Themes, we are better able to understand each other. Knowledge of my Signature Themes has affected my life in many smaller ways, too. After learning about talents and strengths-based thinking, I even find myself making calls and sending e-mails and notes, telling people what they are good at.

Focusing on my talents has opened doors I did not even know existed. I am grateful for that opportunity; nonetheless, looking back I cannot help wondering what kind of student or athlete I could have been if my teachers and coaches had focused on what I did well instead of what I could not do.

My wish is that many more people will have the opportunity to discover their Signature Themes and develop their strengths.

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